

From Humility to Glory:  
Humility Washes Feet  
John 13:1-17, 31b-35

We are coming to the end of the Forty Days of Lent. Our theme for Lent has been, “From Humility to Glory.” We have learned from Christ how to be humble. This is important, because we are destined for glory if we have the humility to handle it. The humble recognize that all power and authority comes from God to be used to serve others. Although they are gracious in accepting praise and generous in giving praise, they do not seek it and understand that the good they do comes from God.

Jesus continued to model humility for us to the very end. John tells us that Jesus used the Last Supper to once again emphasize the importance of humility, as he washed the disciples’ feet. He showed that the humble never say, “That’s beneath my dignity.”

We know, of course, that washing feet was the job of a slave. Slaves were the lowest of the low in social standing. They were nobodies. They were given the most menial and disgusting of jobs.

And washing feet was considered a disgusting task. It’s not particularly pleasant in our society. But remember that these people walked in sandals down dusty, narrow paths that they shared with sheep and goats and donkeys.

Is it any wonder that to this day people in that part of the world consider feet to be shameful and embarrassing. It is considered a grave insult to show the bottom of your shoe to someone. Shoes have to be removed before entering a house, because they are considered unclean in every sense of the word. Entering a house with unwashed feet is like eating with unwashed hands.

But there was no slave in the Upper Room to wash feet. We think we know why there was no slave. You will recall that Jesus instructed two of his disciples to go into Jerusalem and find a man carrying a jug of water. They were to follow him back to his house and tell the people of the house to prepare a meal for Jesus and the disciples.

Now, we know that there was no running water. Most people had to go to a well each day to get water for the day. And this was the women’s job. Men didn’t go get water from the well, only the women—unless there was no woman, in which case the men had no choice but to do women’s work. So, it was a very rare thing to see a man carrying water in public.

We now know that in Jesus’ time there were groups of Jewish men who lived together set apart from society to watch and pray and live holy lives. Most likely the house in which Jesus ate the Last Supper was the home of such a group.

Of course, there was no slave in such a group.

Somebody needed to wash their feet. So Jesus did it. Probably no one else but Jesus could have done it. If anyone else had tried, it would have been considered so offensive it probably would have caused a fight.

But no one would resist Jesus—except Peter. He told Jesus he was not about to let him wash his feet. And Jesus told him that if he didn’t allow him to wash his feet, he would be no disciple of his. So, even Peter relented.

It was beneath everyone else's dignity to wash feet. But nothing was beneath Jesus' dignity. He had the freedom to serve people in any way whatsoever. Jesus was free in a way that people who are bound up in being dignified cannot know.

I know a couple who were touring in Europe. They were staying in a bread and breakfast in an ancient cottage that had some stone steps that had been worn down by centuries of people walking up and down them. One day, as the woman was walking up the steps, her foot slipped and she fell. She broke both arms. The doctors put them in a body cast to hold them in place. So for many weeks she lived with her arms like this. I asked the man if they were making it all right. He said, "You know, after what I have had to do for her, I think I can now do anything for anybody."

He discovered that nothing was beneath his dignity, and out of that discovery he had found a new freedom.

For the humble, nothing is beneath their dignity. And because nothing is beneath their dignity, they are free to love people in a way that the dignified cannot know.

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